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Francis B. Nyamnjoh

## Madams and Maids in Southern Africa: coping with uncertainties, and the art of mutual zombification

### **Abstract**

Drawing largely on a just completed empirical study this paper argues that like elsewhere in Africa and the world, maids in South Africa and Botswana, notably migrant maids from Zimbabwe, are subjected to the vicissitudes of ultra-exploitation. They, like their employers are all concerned with the uncertainties that plague their lives. Although employers are assumed to be in positions of power, their reality is often more nuanced and prone to constant negotiations with and concessions to maids. At one level, their own preoccupation with avoiding uncertainties by maintaining whatever advantages they can cultivate implies that vis-à-vis their maids, the employers cannot always afford to enjoy the benefits of being in control. Structural inequalities notwithstanding, mutual zombification seems to be the order of the day between maids and madams.

### **Keywords**

*Southern Africa, Botswana, domestic servants, employment conditions, women, employers, social relationships, migrants, Zimbabweans, feminism, nationality*

## Introduction <sup>1</sup>

Many Southern African housewives, like women elsewhere, have resorted to devaluing and dehumanising fellow women to be able to claim equality with men. A look at gender, domesticity, mobility and citizenship in the region indicates that the world of maids is one of uncertainties, insecurities and acute dehumanisation, even in the midst of abundance and rhetoric of rights and entitlements. If global capitalism is all about opportunities, to maids this comes at the cost of their very dignity as human beings. Not only are maids often victims of ultra-exploitation, they enjoy little legal protection and even

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed study on this subject by the same author is forthcoming (cf. Nyamnjoh 2006)

their basic human rights are always in jeopardy, thanks to inequalities generated through the intersection of race, geography, class, gender and citizenship. Maids in Africa are indeed as a rule powerless and extremely vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. They are often treated as if their humanity were deliberately frozen for zombification with impunity. This necessarily raises the question of coping strategies, individual and collective. How do these maids survive the structures of repression and utter debasement? What do they do to make the best out of a desperate situation in the interest of hope? In other words, what agency are they left with (even as labour zombies<sup>2</sup>) and how do they capitalise on it, despite the structural disempowerment of which they are certified victims? These questions are increasingly the subject of scholarly attention globally. This paper draws extensively from the situation of maids in South Africa and Botswana to argue that even those at the rock bottom of the ladder of hierarchies informed by race, geography, culture, class, and gender, are actively involved in strategies of keeping hope alive. They cherish the idea that the insensitive prescriptiveness of the powerful and exclusionary few, harkens to the call for a cosmopolitan citizenship of diversity and inclusion, where difference is practically liberated from the tokenism of the coercive illusion embodied in the pursuit of the nation-state. The plight of maids demonstrates not only that the nation-state is deaf and blind to the sounds and images of difference, but also that like a workman whose only tool is a giant hammer and to whom every problem is a nail, the nation-state lacks the creative flexibility to be entrusted with the task of managing a world marked by ever more flexible mobilities.

## Turning the tables of exploitation round

In her study of maids and madams in South Africa, Jacklyn Cock remarked that for the most part, the parameters of choice opened to maids were extremely narrow, and that they were markedly powerless to alter their situation. This left them with a sense of being trapped; of having no alternatives; of living out an infinite series of daily frustrations, indignities and denials. To blame were their Lack of educational opportunities and employment alternatives, coupled with influx control legislation restricting the movement of black workers (Cock 1980:7). Despite these frustrations, maids seldom displayed overt signs of dissatisfaction, their voices of complaint were rarely heard, they did not indulge in strikes, and were hardly absent from work. As a result they were often viewed as deferential workers, implying an accep-

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2 On the magic representation of migrant labourers as zombies or an alien-nation cf. Comaroff/Comaroff, 1999:21. See also Nyamnjoh, 2005.

tance of the legitimacy of their own subordination in the social order (Cock 1980:104).

However, although maids were widely viewed as deferential workers, their deference was more apparent than real. According to Cock, because of their powerless situation, which blocked any overt expression of dissatisfaction, many maids adopted a "mask of deference" as a protective disguise, that enabled them to conform to the expectations of their employers and to shield their real feelings. They did not accept the legitimacy of their own subordination in the social order, were highly conscious of being exploited, and quite aware of the structures that made this possible. They also felt a sense of community of interests (Cock 1980:102). Cock identified a description of the cheerful incompetence, non-committal attitude and silence of maids, as their most effective weapons against the quest by their all-powerful employers to know them. Significantly, Cock suggested that the maids' silence, and mockery of employers, could be viewed as muted rituals of rebellion, and as a crucial mode of adaptation, a line of resistance that enabled the maids to maintain their personality and integrity intact. She further suggested that even petty pilfering could be construed as an expression of situational rebellion, although it was more likely to be a strategy of survival than a private revolt, given their low wages and high number of dependants (Cock 1980:103).

Apart from these passing references to muted resistance or agency, Cock's study seems mainly about demonstrating the extent to which maids in apartheid South Africa were powerless and vulnerable victims of ultra-exploitation. While such a focus was important at the time of her study, it is likely that an additional set of questions on agency might have yielded a richer harvest of coping strategies. Perhaps it could reveal, how in very subtle ways maids sought to turn their structural powerlessness into personal strength, as is the case in Swaziland, where rural women who migrate to Manzini reportedly use domestic work as a housing strategy and also as a stepping stone to better things (Miles 1998). These questions I have pursued further in a Botswana study from which I draw, and the details of which are part of a book on citizenship and xenophobia in contemporary Southern Africa (cf. Nyamnjoh 2006).

Just as studies have proliferated on the situation of women and gendered power relations, increasingly scholars are seeing the need to study how domestic servants question and contest their circumstance and treatment by employers, as a way of understanding individual and collective strategies of coping with or resisting dehumanisation. Drawing on James Scott, Shah (2000:108), in her study of domestication of household labour in Nepal, notes everyday forms of resistance, coping and complicity among responses by servants to their predicament. Depending on the degree of their frustrations, servants might as a way of coping vote with their feet or indulge in foot-

dragging, going slow, pilfering, sulking, and non-responsiveness, and also in ridiculing their employers through gossip, but without openly challenging the dominant ideology. Although such action might, according to Scott, appear as little more than nibbling away at the structures of their subordination (cited in Shah 2000:108), they are nonetheless an eloquent statement about how those at the margins of conventional, institutionalised and hierarchical structures of power and citizenship contribute to the sabotage, capture or redefinition of relations of exploitation. That a useful culture of resistance finds its genesis in such everyday forms is well demonstrated by how much ordinary slaves in the Americas or colonial subjects in Africa with no institutional support contributed through their everyday actions to raising and sustaining awareness about their predicament among those with the power to transform the structures of repression. Seen only as actions by desperate individuals, such nibblings are likely to be misrepresented and their importance underestimated. Taken collectively, however, they certainly contribute to a culture of contestation that should eventually undo or at least significantly weaken the structures of unequal citizenship and relations between maids and their employers. While contestation by individual maids alone cannot undo the structures of exploitation and inequality, they cannot be undone without their collaboration and active participation either. Such agency is suggested by Grandea and Kerr (1998) in their report on a participatory action research by a group of 14 Filipino maids in Canada, who set out to investigate and understand their working conditions and factors that gave rise to them and more importantly, to identify action-oriented strategies to improve their situation (Grande and Kerr 1998:7-8).

Maids may or may not be organised into trade unions aimed at safeguarding their interests as a professional group, but they boast of informal personal and social networks for mitigating the effects of disorganisation in contexts of reluctance by states and employers to recognise and provide legal and contractual protection for them (Cock 1980:73-74; Yeoh and Huang 1998; Shah 2000:109; Anderson 2000: 162-166; Mattingly 2001). In Europe, despite legal barriers and in spite of the atomising nature of domestic work, both documented and undocumented migrants use their personal networks of relatives, friends and church members to seek employment and sociality, and to exchange information (Anderson 2000:31-39; Anthias 2000:35-38; Chell-Robinson 2000:109-115). In certain cases, migrants' friends or relatives may lend them the airfare and offer help with employment and accommodation, or simply offer to help support them until they find work. In some instances, like in Barcelona for example, it was not unusual for contacts to arrange false employers for their friends: asking Spaniards to offer a job to a friend back home to enable them to get a visa, but with both parties understanding that, on entry to Spain, the migrant will look for work elsewhere. The networks are equally beneficial to employers who may want certain types of persons to

work for them, and have proved useful for ensuring a community check on employer abuse (Anderson 2000:31). In the case of Filipinos in Italy, their networks and greater experience as maids enable them to negotiate for relatively better wages with Italian employers who have grown to prefer them (Chell-Robinson 2000:111). However, not only do networks initiate migration and support the migrants in their migration, they also encourage further migrations (Chell-Robinson 2000:115). As Ribas-Mateos (2000:181) notes of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Spain, 'When a female migrant is able to save sufficient money and has enough information about the administrative procedures relating to family reunion, she attracts the rest of her family groupings, and in certain cases, a maid's family may be dispersed in different European countries to maximise opportunities.'

Maids are not passive, uncalculating victims of ultra-exploitation. Sometimes their solace or strength comes from being able to compare and contrast between evils: abject poverty versus ultra-exploitation or miserable wages; asphyxiating patriarchy versus abuse or dehumanisation by employers; losing one's own family to hunger, ignorance and disease versus temporarily sacrificing it through enslavement by employers and their families; perishing under the scourge of senseless dictatorships where one calls home or living as a marginally better off but undocumented zombie abroad. With long-term dreams and goals of financial gain, self-determination and autonomy, the migrant maids in Italy, for example, consider hardships and considerable sacrifice ... as unavoidable, but a worthwhile price to pay (Chell-Robinson 2000:111). This leads Anthias (2000: 35-38) to observe that while migrant domestic workers might see migration as an opportunity for economic improvement for their families, the very same migration could also serve as an escape route from patriarchal structures, for women running away from their allotted place in their societies of origin. The empowerment that comes from migration in such a context could provide them the strength they need to bear the excesses of service or servitude to which they are subjected by their employers and the host state. This multi-faceted and complex (Anthias 2000: 35-38) of the migrant women, Anthias argues, hardly permits migration to be seen in simple terms as either leading always to a loss, or always to a gain, in social status. The maid emerges as someone who juggles structures and agency in a delicate mixture of frustration and gratification to ensure her survival and sustenance for her relationships with relatives, friends and communities at home or in the host country.

Throughout the world, the relationship between maids and their employers is marked by tensions, frustrations and complaints, with very rare moments of satisfaction, as both strive for what they perceive to be their rights or entitlements. In this context, it is as commonplace for employers to glorify their generosity as it is for maids to celebrate victimhood. While the structures of inequality might lend credence to perspectives that focus too

narrowly on simple dichotomies or binaries, a closer look would suggest that maids are as manipulative as they are manipulated, and that power and victimhood beyond their structural confines, may each be as much the reality of the employer as they are of the maid.

## Maid, madam and uncertainties in Botswana

The population of maids in Botswana comprises citizens (54.1 percent) and immigrants (45.9 percent), who are mostly Zimbabweans. Though widely employed even by top bureaucrats and politicians, Zimbabwean maids have no legal existence. The citizens consist of elderly women with hardly any education, and young girls of between 15 and 30 years of age, who have dropped out of school for one reason or another - often an early pregnancy occasioned by a man with little regard for responsible fatherhood. In all, 80 percent of maids interviewed claimed to have had some kind of formal schooling, but with few certificates to prove it. This however must not be mistaken for professional training as maids, which 91.4 percent said they have never received. Some laid claims to other professional competencies such as hairdressing, typing, tailoring, weaving and occasionally teaching and nursing. Conscious though maids were of the need for professional training, very few (8 percent) had had the courage to suggest this to their employers for fear of being fired. Even then, the suggestions had all been turned down.

Botswana maids may either be from the home village of those recruiting them, or recommended by a neighbour, friend or colleague at work. Relatives brought in from the home village to assist with domestic chores in exchange for being assisted to attend school for example, are often reluctant to accept the label of 'maid'. They tend to insist they are merely helping out with the baby, cooking, laundry and or other duties in the house, and that they are not being paid, even though they receive regular token payments for their toiletries and other basic needs. In some cases, they readily volunteer either that there is a regular maid besides them, or that the family hires a maid from time to time when the work is too much for them. Usually aged between 18 and 25, the majority of them cited failing their Ordinary Level examinations and the poverty of their parents as the reasons for coming to live with their sister, brother or uncle in town, with the hope of giving their examinations a final go and moving on. In some instances, an unwanted pregnancy had forced them out of school, and now that the child was big enough, they had left him or her with parents and joined relations in town to start life afresh. Sometimes, it was the plight of those in the city that brought a girl from the village to help out. It would appear that to be maid, it does not suffice to do a maid's work: one must be seen and treated as a maid to qualify. And when those one considers family begin to see and treat one as a maid, one knows it is time to

move out, to be paid as a hired hand or to regret mistaking strangers for family.

Maids, like their employers are all concerned with the uncertainties that plague their lives. Although employers are assumed to be in positions of power, exploiting rather than being exploited, their reality is often more nuanced and prone to constant negotiation with and concessions to maids. At one level, their own preoccupation with avoiding uncertainties by maintaining whatever advantages they can cultivate implies that vis-à-vis their maids, the employers cannot always afford to enjoy the benefits of being in control. As evidenced in my forthcoming book (cf. Nyamnjoh 2006), employers may find themselves cooking their own food, baby-sitting their own children, and ironing their own clothes even with maids employed to take care of these things. Maids are far from being a permanent asset, and employers' real experiences with them suggests they are quite often a liability. Employers are not at ease, even when maids were employed precisely to make it possible for them to live a life of comfort. Like most employers, one British woman felt her flexibility, generosity and sociality were taken advantage of by her maid: 'So for example, she would say, can I borrow your clothes and can I have this day off? And at first I was like, okay. No problem. But then, I began to realise that this person was actually taking advantage of what she perceived to be my ignorance of what was involved in her job. In other cases, generosity, especially by European employers, has been fed upon, and often abused by maids inviting their extended families from the villages to harvest opportunities and material comfort they had hardly dreamt of. Attempts by sensitive employers at empowerment of their maids through better wages and more comfortable living conditions, are greeted with ever more claims on their generous wallets.'

Employers feel compelled to keep their fridges locked, and must constantly monitor their possessions to ensure against theft by maids. Some clean their own bedrooms rather than risk losing prized possessions, and others would rather be their own servants than task the filthy maids they employ with cooking for them. Some are so distrusting that they refuse to leave their maids with keys to their houses when away at work and the children at school, allowing access to the houses for maids only in the afternoons when the children are back to keep an eye on things. Others find themselves fighting with maids and their boyfriends for authority over their own domestic spaces, and in certain cases, the maids have been known to question the authority of the madam to give them orders.

Thus, although employed as subordinates and generally perceived as underdogs even by scholars, maids are not always as passive and as powerless as they appear to be. Confronted with real or imagined opportunism by maids and the fear of uncertainties this might occasion in their lives, some employers would rather underwork than risk exploiting their maids to the



fullest. It is therefore not surprising to find some madams deliberately tempering the comfort of being maided, afraid to lose out to the maid in one way or another (see Nyamnjoh 2006, for examples).

In some cases, the maids have actually turned the tables round on the madams, stripping them of the ultimate attributes of being in charge. The maid comes in an outsider, imposes her strategic presence, and takes over not only the domain of serving, but also the wife's responsibilities in the house, thereby eclipsing the wife. Eventually, the husband or boyfriend sees more of the maid through her presence, activities and empathy than he does his own wife or girlfriend. And the maid in that sense becomes a wife (girlfriend) substitute, and eventually, in certain cases, the wife (girlfriend) (see Nyamnjoh 2006).

Some madams find direct contact between maids and their partners uncomfortable, risky, and to be discouraged. As one put it, 'I know two where the husband slept with the maid. And I know a case where the maid accused the husband of making advances at her [...]' So I think it's always better for a man to keep quiet and keep out. It is not always men who confine women to the role of dealing directly with maids. The self-interest of madams is usually a key factor, and smart maids can play madams against their husbands or boyfriends for their own ends.

The second scenario is of employers who are not deterred by the possible uncertainties maids might bring to their lives, and therefore are more ready to exploit and debase maids to the fullest. They employ maids from off the streets, who are mostly illegal Zimbabwean immigrants and whose full names and backgrounds they hardly know, and so are vulnerable from the outset. They leave these maids with keys to their homes, not so much out of trust than of necessity, expect the maids to cook, clean, wash and iron for them, and are generally dependent on the maids, whom they relegate to the kitchen during meal times. The latter may be too dirty and unsophisticated to cook a decent meal, or unqualified to take care of children, but the employers are ready to ignore all that in the interest of exploitation. Some even go as far as relinquishing their most intimate prerogatives, such as cleaning their own and their husbands' underwear, to maids, most of whom feel really diminished for being compelled to do so.

These maids in turn feel aggrieved for being treated as beasts of burden or zombies by employers to whom their presence matters only in service or servitude. As such, the maids are likely to indulge in everyday resistance of the type noted elsewhere. In the case of Botswana this includes: petty theft or serious theft in connivance with gangsters they know; abusive or reckless use of the home phone to call cellphones or to call abroad while pretending not to know how to use the phone or that none of her relatives or friends have got a phone; extravagance in consumption of foodstuff, water and electricity; eating the baby's porridge when the madam turns a blind eye on the maid's need for

food; provocative behaviour aimed at outstaging the madam or enticing her boyfriend or husband; and deliberately disobeying or challenging the authority of the madam of the house. It also includes: taking unscheduled days off or not returning in time from days off, such that it embarrasses their employers, forcing them to change their plans or to swear and curse and freak out; acting with reckless abandon and disregard for the values of their employers by bringing boyfriends home to their living quarters or by simply going off with them unannounced; inviting boyfriends and other acquaintances to watch television, drink, eat and chat instead of attending to chores when the employers are away at work; sampling the wardrobe, jewellery and prized possessions of the madam when she is away at work and sometimes wearing some of her dresses and jewellery to parties unauthorised; gossiping with neighbouring maids and eavesdropping on the tensions and conflicts of their employers with the possible intention of making social capital out of it; and beating, abusing or roughhandling the children left under their care (see Nyamnjoh 2006, for further supporting complaints by employers).

Like one member of staff of Ditshwanelo (a local human rights NGO in Botswana) so aptly stated, it is not that all maids are bad, or that Zimbabwean maids are thieves, but it is evident that if you don't pay the maids, they'll pay themselves. Zimbabwean maids, some employers tended to agree, were more likely to steal out of need and desperation, given the precarious situation of their families back home. This situation made them even more desperate and frustrated when faced with insensitive employers, as various accounts from maids during interviews, have shown. By way of example, here is what a Zimbabwean maid said: these people, they think us Zimbabweans, we do not have minds to think or we do not feel the pain when they are shouting at us. That's why some of the Zimbabweans beat their bosses, because some of them shout with bad words like: you are smelling, move away of me. Some say: you have learned to sleep on a bed in my house. Some say: you have to drink tea without milk, because the milk is very expensive. In other instances, maids who feel maltreated by their madams could hide vital information from them concerning the infidelity of their husbands or boyfriends, even if not necessarily with them as accomplices: this woman [her madam] thinks she is better than me. If only she knew what happens. I know people around here whom her husband sees, but why should I tell her when she treats me like dirt? Everyone in the neighbourhood is laughing behind her back. Serves her right. And these forms of everyday resistance are just some of the ways employed by maids for paying themselves or mitigating the effects of exploitation on their humanity.

Zimbabwean maids in particular have to do a lot more to cope with uncertainties in their lives and with the insecurities facing them in Botswana. Networks are very important for them, if they must have accommodation, do more than piece jobs, be informed of job opportunities at the earliest, and earn

a reasonable amount of money before their stay expires or before they fall prey to one of the routine clean up campaigns organised by the police. Maids serve as ears and eyes for one another at their various places of work, and are ready to recommend their friends or relations to their employers. As ears and eyes for one another, they would recommend someone and say,

this one is a good person, I know this person, and where she comes from, we are from the same village at home. I know her family, I know this one, I know that one.

These networks are also important for safekeeping of whatever items maids may be accumulating by theft or otherwise, for taking them back home to families and friends in Zimbabwe. Once safely disposed of, few maids would own up to stealing unless caught red-handed: it is only when you have caught them that they would admit. But if you have not caught them, even if you know it is them who have stolen, they would still deny. Zimbabwean maids are much better at networks than their Botswana counterparts. In this regard, Zimbabwean maids who stay out of their places of work are deliberately vague or circumspect about the exact places they stay, since they feel more vulnerable if their employers know. This makes it much easier for them to steal in bulk and make their way across the border before they can be traced. The networks are also useful sources of information on possible raids by the Botswana police. Family and friends in Botswana serve as points of contact, providing potential or newly arrived maids with useful information on how to access and integrate themselves in Botswana. No space is too full to temporarily accommodate a relative or friend that has just arrived and yet to find a job. Church membership, the Zionist Church of Christ (ZCC) in particular, provides useful solidarities and a feeling of invulnerability. Sometimes, solidarity is not based on blood relations, friendship or familiarity of any kind, apart of course, from a common language, a common sense of being Zimbabwean, a common sense of victimhood (see Nyamnjoh 2006 for examples).

Another survival strategy is how maids or Zimbabwean immigrants in general manage their passports and stay in Botswana. One maid said that given the reluctance of immigration authorities to give visas repeatedly without evidence of business in Botswana, and given the relatively short periods of stay authorised, many of them send their passports back to Zimbabwe once they have been let into Botswana. For they have discovered that it is more advantageous to live in Botswana without a passport than to be caught with one that has expired. Towards Christmas when Zimbabweans like to go home for family reunions, it is commonplace for many to seek to be deported, so they can have free transport home, enjoy Christmas and then come back.

## The predicament of intra-gender hierarchies

It is important to salute efforts that have been made in the study of domesticity on the one hand, and the changing material and historical circumstances that generate new configurations in Africa and elsewhere. It is also important to appreciate the impressive volume of work done towards documenting the ultra-exploitation and dehumanisation to which women as maids are being subjected as a result of cultural, political, racial, class, gender and economic biases. What remains inadequately explored are relationships between maids and employers that seek not to confirm or perpetuate exploitation and dehumanisation, but rather to question these. Some relevant efforts exist, but much remains to be done, especially on and in Africa.

The intention of the study and paper is not to ignore or minimise the power of structures of exclusion, but rather to investigate both the power of those structures and how those subjected by them seek to cope or even to challenge the control they impose. Such coping, challenge, attempts at sabotage or at suggesting more democratic and horizontal relationships between madams and their maids, even if articulated mostly in the form of everyday resistance, contribute towards a culture of contestation that, as analysts, we cannot afford to ignore. If the uncertainties and insecurities plaguing the lives of contemporary African maids and madams must be addressed, it is important to look beyond our conventional focus on constitutional and institutional forms of power, or on rules and procedures, to social action by maids and madams that renegotiate and redefine power relations on a daily basis.

What certainly requires more research both in Southern Africa and elsewhere is why and how women, fully conscious of their collective subordination as a social class, should allow themselves to be co-opted by masculine structures of domination, to the point where they pose as gatekeepers against the emergence of fellow women. Be it in Europe, North America, or Australia, the identities and role of educated middle-class women as graceful and cultured have depended on their ability to negotiate conviviality with the dominant male order and to escape some of the trappings of domesticity by using race and class as a license to deny fellow women their citizenship and humanity (Palmer 1989; Anderson 2000; Haskins 2001; Mattingly 2001), thereby raising legitimate questions about those of them who claim feminist commitments of "sisterhood" and support for all women (Tronto 2002:35).

Focusing on the USA, Tronto also argues that the incomplete feminist revolution is in part to blame, for leaving unresolved the fundamental questions of how to allocate responsibility for child care in our society (Tronto 2002:47). To her, the twin pursuits by upper middle-class women of greater professionalism and intensive and competitive mothering have only enhanced the class and citizenship privileges of some while reviving the semi-

indentured servitude of others (Tronto 2002:44-46). She uses The “Nanny” Question to argue that basic feminist notions of justice are undercut when the wealthiest members of society use domestic servants to meet their child care needs (Tronto 2002:35). Furthermore, It does not bode well for the creation of democratic citizens if children witness the arbitrary and capricious interaction of parents and servants or if they are permitted to treat domestic servants in a similar manner. Tronto argues that there can be no equality of opportunity for a child who grieves as her mother goes off each day or week to serve, essentially, as a substitute mother for some other children and leaves her without her mother. Just as there can be no equality of opportunity when the child is taken along to be a human toy for the children of the well-to-do (Tronto 2002:40). This calls for the completion of the stalled feminist revolution by reallocating household responsibilities within and among households (Tronto 2002:47). Not even the fact of developing a national network of crèches with state support in Mozambique for example, has diminished the role of women as the primary caregivers, both as crèche workers and as the parents with daily responsibility for the children (Sheldon 1992).

In Africa, a similar hierarchy of citizenship and humanity is recognisable in the relationship between maids and madams (Nyamnjoh 2006). We have noted how in apartheid South Africa, race, geography and class connived to keep the black maid a girl for ever, even as the children she babysat grew up to be ladies and gentlemen (Cock 1980). Seen as an eternal child by her white employer, the black maid could

... even be denied legitimacy in the crucial mark of adult status – that of being a proper wife and mother. As an eternal child, she should be virgin, and any excursion into sexual activity is likely to be described in terms implying immorality. She has “boy-friends” rather than a husband and her children are viewed as the fruit of irresponsible lust rather than as the natural consummation of her womanhood. She is “irresponsible” because she “cannot afford to bring them up properly, so I suppose we shall have to help out as usual”. Her duties as a servant make it impossible for her to fulfil her maternal or wifely roles as she would wish, and so she is viewed almost as a teenager who has produced an illegitimate baby. (Whisson and Weil 1971:39)

Although the maid or nanny is usually the child’s first ally against parental authority, the child rarely accords her the respect and dignity she deserves. On the contrary, she is addressed like a child, ordered about like a child, and responds appropriately. Soon, she even begins to treat the growing child as if he/she is her elder and superior, despite any efforts by the child’s parents to support her adult status in the child’s eyes. The features which mark her off from other adults in the child’s mind are her colour and status, the fact of being called maid or girl, treated as a second-hand being, or addressed as a nameless creature, a labour machine, a zombie. In instances where the maid is

black, brown or yellow, as is likely to be the case in these days of accelerated flows of migrants or in contexts of racial segregation, the child tends automatically to associate status with colour, and to see his/her warm relationship with the nanny as something to be outgrown if he/she is to become truly adult like his/her parents. And most of the times, the dependent position of the maid is likely to assist the child in this development by her ready adoption of the subordinate role in relation to him (Whisson and Weil 1971:46).

In other parts of Africa where race is not a factor, class, status, culture and other indicators of hierarchy and belonging are used to determine who shall be served and serviced by whom and how. But sometimes the servant resists in myriad ways, seeking whatever dignity she can afford to reassert her truncated citizenship and humanity. To talk housework, as Ehrenreich (2001) rightly points out and as demonstrated in my study of Botswana (Nyamnjoh 2006), is really to talk power. If housework is degrading, it is not because this is manual labour, but rather because it is embedded in degrading relationships which it inevitably serves to reinforce. To make a mess that another person will have to deal with – the dropped socks, the toothpaste sprayed on the bathroom mirror, the dirty dishes left from a late-night snack – is to exert domination in one of its more silent and intimate forms. One person's arrogance – or indifference, or hurry – becomes another person's occasion for toil (Ehrenreich 2001:61). And when the person who consistently and heavy-handedly oversees the cleaning up is another woman, and worse still, one armed with the rhetoric about women's rights, entitlements and empowerment, there is reason for cynicism to take centre stage. It then becomes legitimate to doubt the extent to which women can effectively resist co-optation by the dominant male order that has made a mockery of citizenship in real terms.

That the world of domestic work is today dominated by women derives from globalised capitalist structures of and assumptions about gender and power, which have tended to prescribe and legitimate the public sphere for men, while domesticating women or confining their abilities and capabilities to the private sphere and less visible zones of the public workplace (Anderson 2000:162-166; Hansen 1992:3-4). The implications of this are that while men are free to seek employment and harness possibilities outside of the home, women are generally tamed and contained by domestic chores, from which they can only graduate fully or temporarily by compounding the subjection of fellow (socially, politically or economically less well-placed) women.

Maids and madams may be both subordinate to men, but they are not equal in terms of power, dignity and entitlements. While madams may sometimes feel treated as maids by the men in their lives, it is not often that maids feel treated as madams. The price of women's freedom to work outside of the home or to claim real or symbolic equality to men, far from being the privi-

leges, comforts and power of men, is often the further debasement of their humanity as women and the internal conflicts and contradictions that that generates amongst women as a social category. Race, class and socio-economic status largely determine which women shall qualify to be co-opted by men into the public sphere to further the debasement of fellow women (Anthias 2000:27). Hence, it is not only the high status of men and their economies of masculinity that is premised on the domestication or housewifisation of women (Mama, 1999:68-71), status-seekers amongst women can only claim their space in the limelight of the public sphere through compounding the domestication, trivialisation or debasement of other women.

It would appear that in Botswana at least, men are a lot more sympathetic to maids and the uncertainties and insecurities that plague their lives, than are their wives and girlfriends who hire and fire maids. It is men who are likely to appeal to the madams to be less harsh on their maids, to display some generosity in pay, gifts or tips, and to ask the maids to emerge from the kitchen to eat on the dining table, even if sometimes, this is motivated by selfish, predatory reasons. Maids are more likely to describe their madams in less positive terms than do the men, even if this could in part be explained by the fact that the madams are their direct bosses and therefore in the firing line of their daily frustrations. Nevertheless, this gives the impression that it takes women as gatekeepers to dehumanise or zombify fellow women with impunity. This calls for further research into the nature, scope and depth of repression by women of women as a repressed social category by men.

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## **Zusammenfassung**

Auf der Grundlage einer kürzlich fertiggestellten empirischen Untersuchung legt dieser Artikel dar, dass Dienstmädchen in Südafrika und Botswana – wie auch anderenorts in Afrika und weltweit – vielfältigen Formen von intensiver Ausbeutung ausgesetzt sind. Sowohl Bedienstete wie auch ihre Arbeitgeber sind mit einer Situation genereller Ungewissheit konfrontiert: Obwohl gemeinhin angenommen wird, dass Arbeitgeber sich in einer Machtposition befinden, stellt sich die Realität oft komplizierter dar und ist von kontinuierlichen Kompromissen und Zugeständnissen den Dienstmädchen gegenüber gezeichnet. Auf eine gewisse Weise



hindert die ständige Sorge der Arbeitgeber, Ungewissheiten zu vermeiden – indem sie Dienstmädchen allerlei Vorzüge bewilligen – sie sogar daran, die Vorteile ihrer Machtposition auszunutzen. Trotz der strukturellen Ungleichheiten scheinen die Beziehungen zwischen Dienstmädchen und Dienstherrinnen von Prozessen gegenseitiger Zombifizierung gekennzeichnet zu sein.

### **Schlüsselwörter**

*Südliches Afrika, Botswana, Hausangestellte, Arbeitsbedingungen, Frauen, Arbeitgeber, Soziale Beziehungen, Migranten, Simbabwe, Feminismus, Staatsangehörigkeit*

### **Resumé**

Basée sur une étude empirique qui vient tout juste d'être finalisée, cette article soutient qu'en Afrique du Sud et au Botswana – à l'instar des autres pays africains et partout ailleurs dans le monde – les domestiques, particulièrement les domestiques d'origine zimbabwéenne, sont sujettes à de multiples formes d'exploitation intensive. Tout comme leurs employeurs, celles-ci doivent faire face aux divers doutes qui les assaillent. Bien que les employeurs soient censés être en position de force, la réalité est souvent plus nuancée et consiste souvent en négociations et concessions constantes envers les domestiques. Dans une certaine mesure, l'obsession des employeurs à fuir la moindre incertitude, en accordant toutes sortes d'avantages aux domestiques, les place souvent dans une situation où ils n'arrivent même pas à profiter de leur position de force. Malgré les inégalités structurelles existantes, domestiques et patronnes semblent toutes être en proie à un processus de zombification mutuel.

### **Mots clés**

*Afrique australe, Botswana, employés de maison, conditions de travail, femmes, employeurs, relations sociales, migrants, habitants de Zimbabwe, féminisme, nationalité*

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